

Meeting the Light:
An Explanation of Near-Death Experiences

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It's happened more often than many realize. Near-death experiences occur so often in people close to death, that the topic has become the focus of many doctors, physiologists, and psychologists. Coined by Dr. Raymond Moody, "near-death experiences" (NDEs), are a phenomenon when a person becomes clinically dead and he or she experiences sensations and images of an "afterlife" but then returns to the body minutes or hours later.

A 1982 Gallup poll said that 8 million American adults experience NDEs, which works out to one in 20 at that time. Another source (Wikipedia, n.d.) says the occurrences are one in five, while psychiatrist Bruce Greyson says NDEs occur with one in three who come close to death. The subject is difficult to study and frequency of occurrences is not clear, but it can be assumed that NDEs are common. NDEers emerge transformed into new people whose life has changed typically for the better. While near-death experiences may be partly explained by psychological or physical research, the lack of complete evidence creates little grounded proof or explanation of the phenomenon.

What Happens

In 1975, Dannion Brinkley died. He died again fourteen years later, and wrote about it (1994). Brinkley had experienced a NDE. The first time he was struck by lightning while speaking on the phone to his friend. He was thrown up to the ceiling and crashed onto his bed where his wife found him and began trying to resuscitate him. When in the hospital, he found himself looking down onto his own body as doctors tried to bring him around. His pain faded away into a feeling of indescribable bliss. He could seemingly wish himself into other areas of the hospital like the waiting room where he heard his brother-in-law complaining how he was missing a business meeting because Brinkley was going to kick the bucket. He heard the doctor announce him dead and soon found himself floating through a dark tunnel which lead to a bright point of light. The light grew and soon he was surrounded by brilliant light. An overwhelming feeling of love grew and "beings of light" surrounded him too. Images of his entire life flashed before him, except *he* experienced everything. He felt the pain he caused others. He felt the humiliation they felt because of him. He also felt the joy others felt thanks to him. It was all put in perspective. The beings of light then showed him images of the future. When Brinkley eventually revived he wrote down 117 of these future

events. 95 came true. After seeing the images, he was told that he was going to go back. As slowly transitioned back into his body, he begun to feel the pain that his body had. Just before he was placed in the hospital morgue, he woke up.

Brinkley's experience is not uncommon to the NDE community. The 1982 Gallup poll found ten common traits in many NDEers (Moody, 1988). Each NDE account varied slightly with each person, but these common traits included an out of body experience (OBE) and a tunnel experience. Overwhelmingly NDEers had painless feelings and experienced the life review like that of Brinkley's.

According to Moody (1988), many people feel an increase of self-identity during their NDE. Any earthly labels vanish. They are not a husband or wife anymore. They're not a daughter or a father. They simply are themselves. NDEers go to a place where time and space do not exist. One woman told Moody that one could say her experience lasted for one second or ten thousand years and it would make no difference.

NDEers quite often have an OBE where they can wish themselves anywhere they choose and hear conversations in other places. Dr. Michael Saborn studied 116 people who have had a NDE

and almost all NDEers could describe their resuscitation procedure perfectly (Moody, 1988).

The accounts of witnessing beings of light is a common occurrence. The light is extremely bright, but is not like bright light that would hurt our eyes. These beings are typically described as beautiful crystals of light that are filled with love. The beings communicate telepathically, a term only we can understand. All the beings know what each other is thinking. This can also be said for NDEers that may know what a family member is thinking during their OBE.

Finally, a life review is a very common occurrence and acts as a panoramic review of the NDEer's life. They experience it all again. They see the good and the bad. They feel the joy and the pain. Many NDEers change their lives because they know they will have to experience this life review again.

While every experience is slightly different in its specifics, there is great commonality in all NDEs. Many of the feelings and experiences are just indescribable. Experiencers simply cannot translate what they felt to human terms. Nonetheless, scientists and scholars still try to find concrete reasons for NDEs.

Reasons and Research

Doctors and scientists say NDEs may be caused by a flood of endorphins in the dying brain which produce dreams based on the collective unconscious (Woerlee, 2004). There are many arguments made.

During the Vietnam War, soldiers complained of the sensation of floating above their body and seeing bright lights. This happened after the application of Ketamine, an anesthetic. It acts as a glutamate blocker. Glutamate is a neurotransmitter that is released when brain cells die. In defense of letting more cells die, the brain releases its own glutamate blocker, similar to Ketamine. When this happens there may be occurrences of NDE-type traits or sensations. Ketamine is also known as Special K on the drug market. Its users experience feelings of going through holes into other worlds that are "impossible to describe in our language." (Wikipedia, n.d.) Although, unlike NDEs, users of Ketamine may not remember their experience and effects of the drug is more likely to be negative.

When a person's heart fails oxygen starvation begins. This causes the pupils to dilate and the depth of field of vision to be reduced. One may see light one hundred times brighter than normal, and objects will seem blurry and indistinguishable. Some

believe this reaction to heart failure may be the reason behind the common NDE characteristic of seeing bright light and beings of light. This simple biological event paired with "deeply held socio-cultural beliefs in a life after death" (Woerlee, 2004) may manifest certain perceptions in the NDEer.

What about children? They have a different perception of death than adults do, yet they report to experience the same exact things in their NDEs (Moody, 1988). Young children, unlike adults, have not been "conditioned" to believe in a certain afterlife experience. From infancy to pre-teen years, the understanding of death changes.

Moody (1988) speaks of a story about a six-month-old girl who was hospitalized for a serious illness. The girl recovered, but at three and a half years old, her mother was trying to explain her grandmother's impending death. The child asked if grandma would have to go through the tunnel to get to God. Many children NDEers later say they are adults in their NDEs but can't explain how they know that.

Even though the reports from children conflict with some scholars' hypotheses, most medical experts focus purely on the physical reasons for NDEs. Ebbern et al said, in the 1996 *Skeptical Inquirer*, that "NDEs provide no evidence for life

after death." By looking at the neurochemistry and physiology, they claim that OBEs are caused when the brain breaks down and feels less attached to the body.

Michael A. Persinger, a Laurentian University neuroscientist, recreated many NDE sensations such as tunnels and lights by stimulating the right temporal lobe of the brain with electromagnetic fields. This may be a key in determining whether the these sensations recreated by Persinger accurately reflect those encountered by NDEers.

Nonetheless, the area of NDEs is difficult to study, since it is hard to recreate a NDE. Studies are most probably conducted only through interviews and medical data. Even with that, one can only make assumptions and educated guesses if and what physical event might cause NDEs. Dr. Susan Blackmore claims OBEs in which people know what doctors did to them or what family members said in other rooms are because of prior knowledge, fantasies, information from the remaining senses, or even lucky guesses (French, 2001).

Some psychologists say NDEs are Schizophrenia, however that is a long-term disorder in which people hear garbled voices and have nightmarish hallucinations. Often times Schizophrenics are unable to function in society. NDEs have completely opposite and

positive characteristics. They hear clear voices and remember their NDE perfectly. NDEs result in a personal transformation for most who experience them.

After the NDE

Criminals have been known to have a complete turn around after having a NDE. During their life review they felt the suffering they caused others and come out with a desire to do good because they know they will have to have a life review again when they die.

NDEers often see their bodies completely differently. They tend to eat healthier, exercise more, take less medication, and spend more time alone meditating (Morse, 1992). Their bodies are seen as something that houses their spirit or soul. And, often times, NDEers will complain less of pain or suffering. "I don't look at life the way other people do," one NDEer says. "You know you don't die, and there's no sense worrying about dying, because you know that you're loved" (Levine, 2003).

Whether or not religious in the beginning, NDEers emerge with a profound appreciation for religion (Moody, 1988), however God is not always who is seen in the light. Former President of the International Association for Near-Death Studies says, "Most

near-death survivors say they don't think there is a God. They know" (Koerner, 1997). Still, NDEers are more loving and less materialistic. In fact, there is a higher divorce rate among NDEers as they no longer share the same interest in material possessions as their spouse has. There is no more need for "ego-boosting achievements" (Koerner, 1997). They are fine where they are.

There have been reports that chronically ill patients became better. Psychiatrists Bruce Greyson and Ian Stevenson have found, in a three-year study, that HIV patients remarkably become cured (Koerner, 1997). The scientific community calls this nothing more than "faith healing."

Conclusion

The scientific community is clearly focused on proof, yet the phenomenon of NDEs may be beyond proof. The medical world agrees upon a "five-minute rule" which says that five minutes after the heart stops, the lack of oxygen-rich blood to the brain induces irreversible brain damage. Most hospital patients are pronounced dead after every effort to revive has occurred. Regardless, a large number have NDEs and are clinically dead for minutes or hours at a time. It's something that baffles the

scientific and medical community, yet provides faith and support to NDEers and some of the religious community.

While Ketamine may create similar NDE sensations or dilated pupils near death may create blurred images of light, scholars' hypotheses and evidence have failed to be a complete reason why people have NDEs. The scientific interpretations above provide a possible explanation to part of the phenomenon. Testimonials though, frequently conflict with these scientific explanations. Children and adults seem to experience the same core NDE traits. Many hear or know things in an OBE they would never had heard if they had been conscious. How can someone come back to life after their brain has been starved of oxygen for a long period of time? We may never know.

NDEers stare eternity in the face and they return completely transformed. It's a blessed experience for most that goes beyond physical or scientific proof. Whether or not NDEs are biological events that occur when the brain dies, they are for sure something of faith.

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